

Career Clusters

Implementation in the States

Career clusters are groups of similar occupations that help organize career planning, and tailor student courses to individual career paths.

BY SUSAN REESE



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When the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEc) released its April 2007 study on career clusters and programs of study, it noted that, “The majority of states have embraced the concept of career clusters and have been consistent in expanding and extending their implementation.”

According to NASDCTEc Executive Director Kim Green, this year has brought a lot more interest in career clusters, and she sees Perkins IV as a big motivation for states to take clusters to the next level. “Most states are using the law as a vehicle to take what they saw as a new vision for career and technical education (CTE) and turn it into a reality,” she says. “In a lot of the conversations we have had, we find states are thinking about, over the lifetime of the act, moving more and more programs toward the career cluster concept and using those federal dollars to really drive change and program improvement. Green added that states are more engaged and are asking tougher questions, such as what it means for the curriculum, what standards they should use, what certifications look like, what it means for the program approval process, and what it means for credit transfer.

The law requires states to implement programs of study (POS), and the states can either develop the programs themselves or they can create guidelines around which locally developed programs of study would be implemented. Green notes that a lot of states are using that kind of process-oriented change method of looking at the programs of study and deciding whether to work with existing ones—and if so how they can create guidelines that can help transform existing programs into the cluster model—or if they should create new programs of study that look more like career clusters.

Assessments and Change

Assessments represent another challenge. Most existing assessments are very job specific, but Perkins IV pushes for the system to be held accountable for technical skill attainment, says Green. “So the absence of having cluster-based assessment while trying to move your instruction in that direction is a bit of a challenge,” she adds. “A lot of conversation is occurring about technical assessment, but we haven’t resolved that issue yet. Some people may be hesitant about moving much further forward until they see what comes out of that assessment discussion.”

Green notes that states say that they are really at the point of figuring out what the needs are at the local level to really make this transformation happen. “I think we’ve only hit the tip of the iceberg when it comes to what kind of professional development, technical assistance and other resources need to be in place to make this change happen.”

Still, she sees that compared to a year ago, more states are not only buying into the vision, but are beginning to see how the career cluster system can work in their state. “You hear a lot more people using the language and talking about the opportunity of using the career cluster model. We’re at that next phase of implementation where people have bought into the concept at the state level, and now they’re trying to make sure they have the support of the people at the local level in both the secondary and the postsecondary systems, and then trying to figure out what they need to put in place to make that change happen.”

Achieving Success in Texas

AchieveTexas is an education initiative designed to prepare students for secondary and postsecondary opportunities, career preparation and advancement, meaningful work and active citizenship. The initiative uses the 16 career clusters as the founda-

tion for restructuring how schools arrange their instructional programs. POS have been created for each career cluster, with the POS based upon the Recommended High School Graduation Plan and easily adapted to the Distinguished Achievement High School Graduation Plan.

Diane Salazar, director of education and training, hospitality and tourism, and human services with the Texas Education Agency Division of Curriculum, says that the biggest challenge has been getting everything done in the timeframe they had set. “We want to do so much that we have to do it in stages,” she said. In 2005, they began preparing the framework for the POS, and in 2006 they developed an implementation guide that districts could use to start implementing some components of the new Perkins law. They started the process with teachers and local CTE



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directors in 2006, but they have involved stakeholders that include the Texas Workforce Commission, the governor's office, business and industry, and postsecondary educators.

In 2007, college and career planning guides and resource materials for counselors were developed. The counselors' materials included a resource guide, 16 college and career guides, a poster, a CD with the cluster icons and POS models, and marketing sheets. "It is important for counselors to have a step-by-step guide for the process for working with students on career clusters and college and career planning," Salazar notes. Four video conferences in the fall and spring of 2008 provided additional professional development for counselors.

AchieveTexas is a statewide initiative, but it encourages adoption locally, and its 24-page implementation guide offers the necessary assistance. Texas is proud of its size, but Salazar notes that size presented somewhat of a challenge as well. To address that issue, the state-recognized POS were developed so that local districts could modify them to their own needs, which was especially helpful for smaller districts that didn't have the resources to implement all of the POS. According to the

implementation guide, building seamless connections will help students prepare for all options, whether that is four-year or two-year postsecondary education, apprenticeship, full-time employment following high school, or the military. The guide provides information on implementing the initiative across all grades, as well as implementing the Texas Achievement Plan (TAP).

Enhanced career guidance is also a part of the initiative, and expanding the quality and quantity of college and career guidance throughout schools is another step in the implementation plan. Among the recommendations are lowering the student-to-counselor ratios and removing some of the duties that counselors are burdened with that take them away from actually counseling students.

AchieveTexas also recommends building seamless connections that link programs and institutions so that students have a smooth transition through school. "We just started to collaborate with social studies at the elementary school level to address the standards related to economics, work and jobs," says Salazar. "We plan to develop resources for elementary schools that can be used by social studies teachers to begin incorporating the career clusters concept. Students entering middle school will be familiar with the career clusters and can better prepare their TAP based on their college and career goals. Presentations at social studies teacher conferences and for social studies district supervisors are being planned to share the career clusters concept."

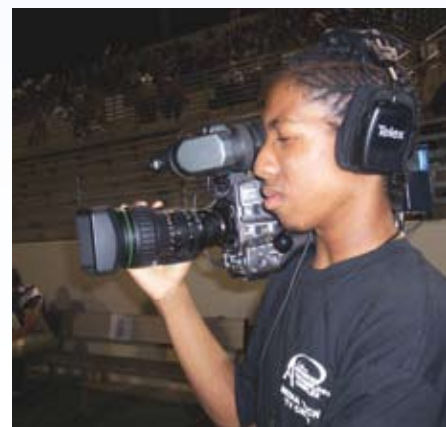
They are also working to coordinate curricula, instruction and assessment, and to create articulation agreements aligning high school programs of study with those of colleges and universities. This means not only Advanced Placement classes but also Advanced Technical Credit and dual credit programs. Salazar says, "Recently, the Texas Workforce Commission developed career planning resources for high school and middle school. They started integrat-

ing the career clusters icons and have started organizing their materials according to clusters."

She notes that successful collaboration with postsecondary education has resulted in the integration of the courses and degrees with the clusters and POS. Starting this spring, community colleges have been bringing in stakeholders from business and industry as well as secondary education to look at the POS that were developed in 2005. Now, they are updating those by putting in actual courses at the community college in those POS.

Extended learning is also part of the AchieveTexas implementation plan, and that includes internships and apprenticeships as well as participation in career and technical student organizations. The initiative also recommends establishing a local Business-Education Success Team to bring together leaders from education, business and industry, government agencies, and professional and trade organizations. Implementing this new vision for education in Texas will require buy-in from many parties who see it as important for the economic future of their state.

They have achieved a great deal since they began, and Salazar gives a lot of credit to the leadership of CTE State Director Karen Batchelor. "She is a visionary, and she has been instrumental in making this happen," notes Salazar. "In addition, Robert Scott, commissioner of education, is firmly committed to improving CTE in Texas."



Improvements continue to be made, and Salazar says that this year the college and career planning guide will be much more interactive, and a guide in Spanish will be available this fall. They are also working on more dual credits and transitions between community colleges and universities.

"We are in the process of updating our course standards," says Salazar. "By September 2009, they will be aligned with the career clusters standards, college readiness standards, and postsecondary standards. In 2009-2010, we will be ready to revise the POS and integrate them with the new courses. Currently, the courses are divided by program area, and under the new standards they will be organized by cluster."

Texas has set a goal of full implementation of the AchieveTexas initiative by 2012, and it hopes that by redesigning schools it can ensure that every student succeeds

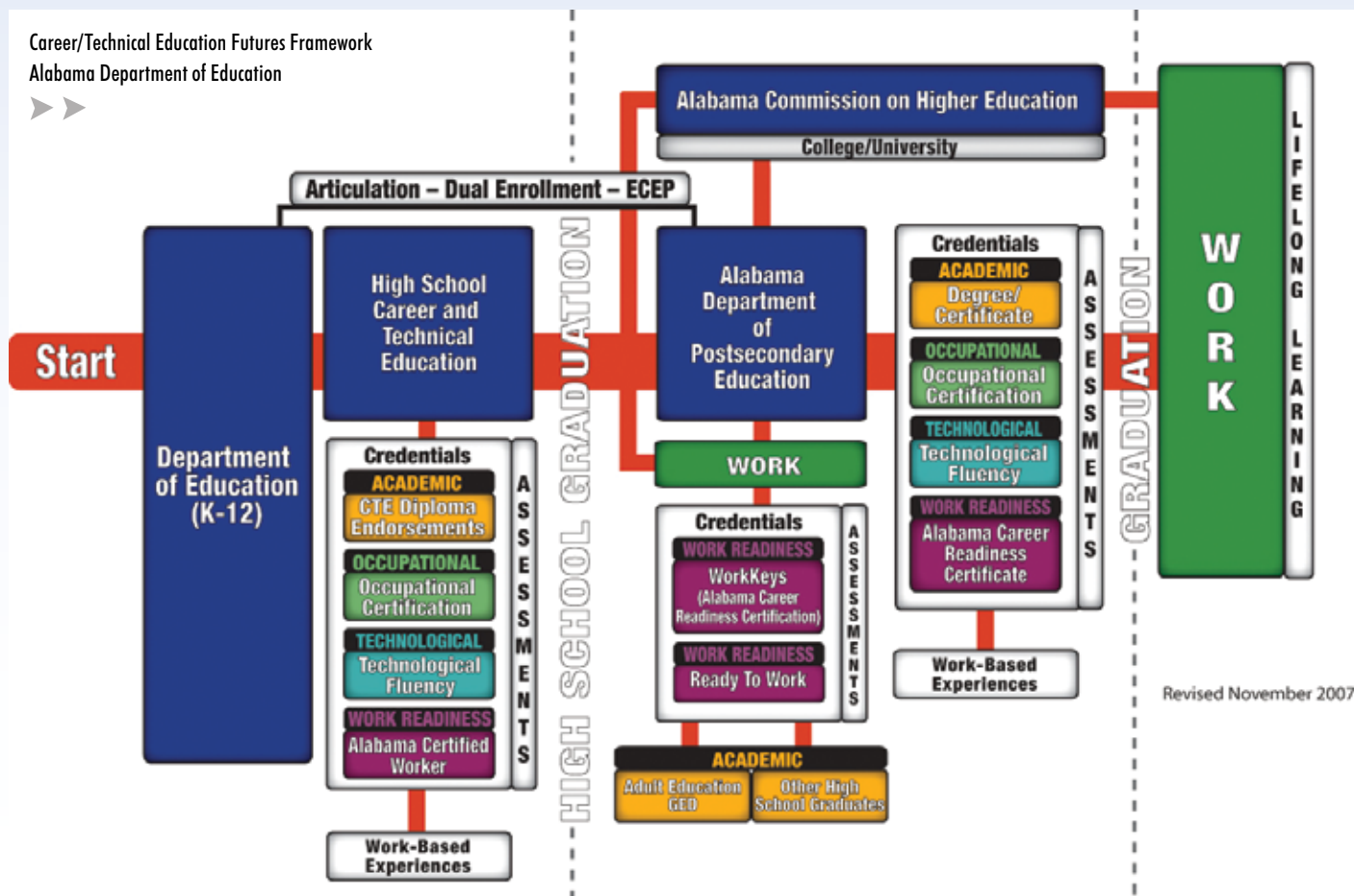
and will one day be contributing to the success of Texas. As the initiative notes on its Web site, "If you can help each student find his or her individual calling and ignite a passion to learn, then you have a better opportunity to achieve college and career readiness."

Working as a Team in Alabama

In Alabama, Courses of Study (COS) are revised and rewritten every five years and contain required standards and course content for local K-12 school systems. Two years ago, the state staff began the research, which included a trip to the national Career Clusters Institute in Phoenix. According to Sherry Key, the director of CTE for the Alabama State Department of Education, after that conference the direction was clear, and in 2007, the research was presented to members of the Alabama COS: Career and Techni-

cal Education Committee. The committee members were appointed by Governor Bob Riley and included local content specialists, business partners, and postsecondary education and higher education members. The COS took a year to complete, with public hearings, comments, rewrites and revisions. It included the 16 career clusters, 59 pathways ending in business and industry-recognized credentials, certificates and/or degrees, and more than 300 courses approved by the Alabama State Board of Education. In February 2008, the state board of education approved the new COS for optional implementation in the fall of 2008 and mandated implementation for the fall of 2009. Those plans will provide the details for evaluation of embedded credit and course content for articulation agreements between secondary and postsecondary education.

Key says they are doing some cutting-



edge things for their students in Alabama and adds, “I am fortunate to work for a leader with a vision, Superintendent Joe Morton, and a passionate state staff that share a common direction and a sense of community. They have taken ownership of the mission to prepare all students for college and careers, and their passion is catching.”

According to Key, career cluster implementation in Alabama has resulted in 81 courses that have received approval for statewide articulation by Morton and Chancellor of Postsecondary Education Bradley Byrne. “Additionally,” notes Key, “We are pulling together other pieces of the puzzle around the Alabama CTE framework.”



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That framework includes four components: academic, occupational, technological and work-based. The academic component is based on diploma endorsements, and at the May meeting, the state board approved four endorsements for the Alabama high school diploma: advanced academic, advanced career and technical, career and technical, and credit based.

Key says, “Students are encouraged to think when choosing between the advanced academic and advanced career and technical endorsements.”

The occupational component for students includes industry-recognized credentials and certificates at the secondary and postsecondary levels, and degrees at the postsecondary level. An articulation agreement between secondary and higher education makes additional opportunities available for students. The technological component of the framework includes a requirement for all students to obtain a minimum of one distance learning course prior to graduation.

“Professional development is being provided for CTE teachers to join the ACCESS distance learning network as distance learning teachers and facilitators,” notes Key. “This will allow CTE coursework to be delivered to rural areas of Alabama, allowing greater participation for all students. Alabama’s work-based component of the framework includes traditional opportunities in cooperative education, job shadowing, clinical experience and laboratory assignments.”

Key believes that her state’s future economic development will depend on its ability to deliver an educated workforce. “The secret to our success is the partnership that exists and is being expanded between secondary, postsecondary and higher education, and the business partners in our state,” she says.

One of those postsecondary partners is Philip Cleveland, whom Key describes as “a dynamic instructional leader at the college level.” Cleveland is the dean of

technical education at Wallace State Community College, but he is a former instructor, principal and tech prep director at the secondary level, so his commitment to CTE is strong at both levels of education. He notes that working with secondary partners in the area has led to converting the college catalog to reflect the career clusters and putting it in alignment to create a seamless pathway from secondary to postsecondary education.

“We have put together additional materials to allow an easy transition,” says Cleveland. “It’s a step-by-step process with the application and materials, and we are working with secondary partners in our service area to provide help with career assessment and a speakers’ bureau.”

Another way they are working together is through Cullman Area Workforce Solution, a group that includes business and industry representatives as well as educators. “We also put together an eighth-grade career awareness expo,” notes Cleveland. “We did an orientation to career clusters, let students tour the technical programs, and then took them to the expo, which included 30 to 40 industry booths.”

This allowed the students to learn about technical certifications they could earn and how those certifications connect to money they could earn in those industries. “We have had very positive feedback from the tech prep coordinators,” adds Cleveland. “We are also working closely with high school counselors to assist in whatever way they like to provide them with college information and clusters information. There is such a demand on them for testing that we want to partner and help them as much as possible.”

Articulation between secondary and postsecondary education also helps facilitate an easy transition for students, and an Alabama high school student can earn college credit for a postsecondary introductory course in his or her career area. In order to earn the credit, students must have a grade of 80 percent or higher. As Cleveland notes, this not only is a financial help to

students, but it is also a great recruiting tool for the college.

The career clusters initiative in Alabama continues to undergo improvement. "We are now in the process of creating resource booklets for high school students focused around the 16 clusters," Cleveland says. "Texas has done a phenomenal job with the concept, and we have utilized some of their materials to meet our needs."

Adapting to meet specific needs is often necessary, according to Cleveland, and not just among different states. "Things go on in Mobile that are different than in northern Alabama," he explains. "You have to approach it to meet the needs of local industry."

A group from Alabama attended the 2008 Career Clusters Institute in Atlanta in June, and Cleveland says that a meeting is planned for this fall to discuss what they learned and what changes might need to be made to their secondary plan. It appears that the teamwork that has been estab-

lished in Alabama as part of the career clusters initiative will continue, and so will the benefits to the state.

Past, Present and Future

Green sees the career cluster model as having the potential to help meet a number of challenges—from integrating academic and technical content to creating a seamless pathway for students. Pathways that cross learner levels can also create a greater opportunity for more dual and concurrent credits. She is beginning to see more interest from the postsecondary education community and the employer community. She is also seeing more people buying into the philosophy, which she hopes will translate into more states working toward implementing the career cluster model in a true sense.

"I hope we can keep people energized," Green says. She also hopes people will see the real potential of career clusters and understand that it does not mean completely

tearing down the good programs of the past and starting over.

According to Green, the real strength of career clusters is in fundamentally looking at what is taught and how we teach it to create a classroom environment that meets the needs of the economy both today and tomorrow. "We want to respect our history as we move forward with this initiative," says Green. "We can honor the past of CTE and do an even better job in the future." ■

EXPLORE MORE

For more information about the States' Career Clusters Initiative, visit www.careerclusters.org.

For more information about AchieveTexas, visit www.achievetexas.org.



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